

Fitchburg, MA

Downtown Fitchburg faced a serious economic challenge. Buildings in and around its downtown were either vacant or decrepit, downtown was not an attraction for people to visit or shop and the street layout encouraged using the downtown area as a pass-through and not as a destination. More importantly, a major potential economic partner – Fitchburg State College – had put all additional investments in downtown on hold.



Faced with such a multi-faceted problem the city developed a comprehensive redevelopment plan. The city put together a 20-year redevelopment plan for the downtown and its surrounding neighborhoods along the Nashua River. The focus of the redevelopment plan is on sections of the city that have been

disenfranchised by aging infrastructure, numerous foreclosures, incompatible land use, disconnected street patterns, fragmented property ownership, and insufficient parking. The plan complements several of the Office for Commonwealth Development's *Sustainable Development Principles*¹ including:

- Redevelop first
- Concentrate development
- Restore and enhance the environment
- Expand housing opportunities
- Provide transportation choice
- Increase job opportunities

A number of redevelopment projects, several of which are either completed or currently in construction, cover an area of over 224 acres concentrated in and around Fitchburg's downtown and involve more than \$60 million in private investment and public assistance from a number of state and federal agencies. When completed, it will generate almost \$800,000 annually in new, growth-driven tax revenue for the city.

A cornerstone of the project is the re-use of the old General Electric assembly plant, which has been redeveloped as The Putnam Place Business and Industrial Center. The building is designed to be flexible, accommodating businesses of various sizes and types, from one to two person offices to light manufacturing enterprises employing a dozen or more people. The facility is designed so that as businesses grow they can expand into other space within the building. Currently about half a dozen businesses, employing approximately 100 people, occupy space in Putnam Place, including a manufacturer of medical equipment, a custom cabinetmaker, and the professional offices of landscape architects, engineers and lawyers. Ultimately, it is expected that about 300,000 square feet of space will be redeveloped providing job opportunities for 400-600 Fitchburg residents. Phase II of the project was recently awarded a \$1 million federal grant and the Federal Railroad Administration recently awarded a \$9 million contract to an engineering firm that has expanded into the facility.

In addition to jobs, one of the potential draws of downtown Fitchburg is its role as a transportation hub. Fitchburg currently serves as the terminus for a commuter rail line into Boston and as the center for the regional bus network. That role has been limited, however, by both a lack of parking and a lack of coordination between bus and train service. The Montachusett Area Regional Transit Authority is nearing completion of an \$8 million intermodal transit facility, funded by federal, state and authority funds, that will locate access to the commuter rail, buses and taxis all in one facility. It will provide parking for nearly 400 cars, a 700% increase over what is currently available, and offer 13,000 square feet of retail and office space, providing services to residents and commuters and, more importantly, will serve as a catalyst for further commercial and residential development.

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¹http://www.mass.gov/ocd/docs/SdPrinciples_color.pdf

Fitchburg State College has the potential to create another opportunity for the revitalization of downtown, but until recently has been reluctant to invest outside of its current campus. The rehabilitation of the North Street Corridor marked a transformation in the relationship between “town and gown.” The run-down condition of North Street, which runs between the Fitchburg State campus and the downtown, made it more of a barrier than a link between the two. The city, with support from state and federal funding, marked its determination to better connect itself to the college through street improvements and by locating a new fire station on North Street. The college marked its commitment to the downtown by investing in a new arts center and athletic facility along North Street. At the same time the city, the redevelopment authority as well as local banks have launched grant and loan programs to increase the housing choices available in and around downtown. People interested in building or buying homes in the redevelopment area may be eligible for assistance with their down payment; those buying near the college may also be eligible for mortgages with attractive rates and reduced down payment requirements. In addition, owners of buildings on Main Street who convert upper-story office space to housing may also be eligible for grants to help with the redevelopment.



The picture on the left was taken in April of 2002 just after a fire destroyed the former Hope Rubber Company building. The picture on the right shows the riverfront park as it existed in September, 2003.

A new draw for the downtown Fitchburg is Riverfront Park, which was completed in August 2003. Used for concerts, fairs and passive recreation, the park sits on the site of the former Hope Rubber facility that was destroyed by fire in 2002. This project was made possible through ambitious local fund-raising and the contribution of over \$400,000 from the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) for site acquisition, design and initial landscaping and \$200,000 from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to restore the river’s habitats. EOEA, through the Department of Fish and Game, in an acknowledgement of the efforts already made by the city to restore and enhance one of its prime environmental resources, also awarded the city a \$14,000 Urban Riverways grant to be used to help plan for the riverfront’s future.

